

A Chance To Heal by usa123

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Summary: Missing scene from the end of 2x09 The Gate in which papa!Hopper is in full swing, Eleven believes Eggos can (help) cure any injury, and Steve gets all the platonic love and affection he deserves.

1. Chapter 1

A/N: I never thought I'd be writing *Stranger Things* fic but here we are. Many thanks to my wonderful betas, *el_spirito* and *hkusgirl*, for helping make this story a reality.

Jim Hopper hated hospitals. Had for as long as he could remember. That was even before Sara, the memories, the treatments, and the news.

His hatred only burned brighter when he'd learned that getting your ass kicked wasn't emergent enough to get you seen by a doctor right away. He'd argued, flashed his badge, and pointed multiple times to Steve, who was conscious but not quite present, but still the receptionist had pointed to a bank of chairs and told them they'd be seen in order of urgency.

"How ya doing kid?" Hopper asked as he dropped into the hard plastic seat again. Steve half-nodded as he continued to press an ice pack against his brightly-colored face. He hadn't said much since they'd arrived but, since Hopper had barely spoken to the kid before the Shadow Monster mess, he had no idea if this level of silence was normal or not.

After everyone had reunited at Byers' house and checked on both Will and Eleven, Joyce had pulled out a first aid kit and started to go to town on everyone's various injuries while they recounted their individual adventures. The Henderson kid's story was conveniently light on details, until he got to the part about just how badly Steve had gotten his ass handed to him.

"I'm pretty sure he needs to go to the hospital," Joyce had said, after wiping off as much blood off Steve's face as she could.

Hopper had been inclined to agree, given how little Steve was reacting to the action around him. "Should we call—" he began but was interrupted by Nancy informing him that Steve's parents were out of town until Thursday.

Steve had then revived enough to insist he'd be okay without the checkup, and, in his interest in avoiding all hospitals ever for the rest of his life, Hopper almost took him up on it. *Almost*. Instead he'd pulled out his keys; pushed back the fear, panic, and unwanted memories; and informed Steve they were leaving.

The Henderson kid had planted himself in the doorway, begging to come with, but Hopper had put his foot down. The kids had been through enough for the day; there was no need to extend that by exposing them to the blood and trauma of an emergency room, even one as mundane as Hawkins. Before the kid could argue, Joyce had swept in, telling them all how worried their parents would be if they didn't come home tonight and how Hopper would call them if anything serious happened.

Hopper was 86% sure the kids would all still be at the Byers' when they got back but he nodded his concession all the same.

The remaining kids had looked less than thrilled, especially when Eleven began to say her goodbyes. It was only when she started trudging to the door that Joyce offered to let her stay with them until Hopper and Steve got back. The teen had turned to Hopper, eyes wide and expression brighter than it had been in the last week, and the Chief found himself unable to say no. Besides, he hadn't really wanted to take El to the emergency room anyway, not when she looked half a second away from crashing herself.

And so here he and Steve were, watching people coming out of examination rooms with casts and bandages but no one being summoned back in.

They sat in silence for another few minutes before Hopper leaned over the next two chairs and retrieved a magazine. He held it out to Steve, who was clenching his jaw so tightly Hopper was sure he was going to crack his teeth. But then, all the color drained from Steve's face and, a split second later, he was sprinting for the nearest trash can, where he proceeded to puke his guts out. The receptionist calmly made a call and by the time Steve was bringing up bile, they were being escorted to an exam room, trash can in tow.

Then, they hit a small stroke of luck. The doctor on duty, a pasty

young Hawkins-native named Wilkin, recognized Steve as Sam Harrington's kid, meaning he was evaluated and hooked up to an anti-nausea drip in a span of fifteen minutes. As Steve slurred his way through his cover story about being mugged, Hopper made sure he was looking anywhere but the needle sticking out of the back of Steve's hand, the unwanted memories a brief lapse in focus away from overwhelming him. He had to stay composed for Steve's sake, and calmed himself down by rubbing frantically at the blue band around his wrist.

While Steve was getting his brain scanned, Hopper called the station and tasked Powell with getting a hold of Steve's parents and picking up Billy Hargrove, who had been gone from the Byers' by the time the first party got back. In general, Hopper was pretty lenient about arresting people for fighting, as long as neither side was hurt too badly and both had given about as good as they'd gotten. Billy though had crossed a line: he could have killed Steve if Max hadn't intervened. Despite that, Hopper made sure Powell would take Billy to the ER first because, no matter how horrible the kid seemed to be, he didn't deserve to die from any unattended injuries tonight.

By the time he'd hung up and grabbed a cup of what passed for coffee from the cafeteria, Steve was back in his room and Wilkins was ready to report the results. Thankfully, the scans revealed no intercranial bleeding or skull fracture, which had been Wilkin's main concerns. Steve had definitely sustained a concussion but, other than a cracked rib and a few stitches to close up the more serious cuts on his face, had only bruises. He wouldn't be awarded any modeling gigs any time soon but was expected to make a full recovery.

"All in all, he was lucky," commented Wilkin while taking down the film. "Could have been much worse."

Steve just muttered something incoherent and closed his eyes...which caused Hopper to lurch off the wall in panic until Wilkin caught his arm.

"He's been through a lot," the doctor said calmly, not looking the least bit concerned. "It's okay for him to sleep."

While Hopper's heart continued to pound against his ribs, Wilkin

noted his findings in Steve's file. "Are his parents back in town?" he then asked Hopper, who shook his head. "In that case, we can keep him overnight for observation but there's really no need medically. He just needs someone to wake him up every few hours and check his mental state."

"I'll do it," Hopper immediately interjected.

Wilkin blinked at him. "You?"

Not having the energy to be offended, Hopper patiently said, "Just tell me what to look for and what to ask him."

Wilkins still looked less than convinced but flipped to a blank page in Steve's file and began writing.

After the last IV was finished and some over-the-counter painkillers had been prescribed, Hopper helped Steve into his truck then very gently took off for the Byers' residence to pick up Eleven. Steve passed out less than two minutes into the drive and every so often, Hop grabbed the kid's wrist, feeling for a pulse, to ensure he was still breathing.

Sure enough, all the kids were still at Joyce's, spread out over every inch of her floor, sharing an assortment of blankets and pillows. Hopper and Joyce had a quick conversation, where he learned Jonathan had fixed the phone so all the kids could call their parents and that Joyce had spoken with each of them, ensuring she'd send their kid home early enough to get ready for school. Hopper then filled her in on Steve's condition and the fact that the kid would be staying with him until his parents returned. After leaving instructions on how Joyce could radio the cabin if something were to happen, Hopper carefully stepped over Lucas and lifted El into his arms, not bothering to try to wake her.

It was a testament to just how exhausted she was that she hardly stirred. He settled her into the truck beside Steve, who was snoring unevenly through his swollen nose, and quietly set off for the cabin.

His next challenge came when the road dead-ended and he was left

wondering how he was going to get both sleeping kids into the cabin. He contemplated leaving Steve while he took Eleven, but that meant leaving Eleven on her own while he came back for Steve—after all that had happened tonight, that separation was a little too much for him to handle. His next thought was carrying both of them, but his back and knees took that moment to preemptively protest...which left him with just one option.

He gently pulled El into his side, put one hand over her ears, then hissed, "Steve" as loudly as he dared. The kid lurched forward with a groan, arm immediately going to his ribs.

"Calm down, Steve," Hopper said, reaching out and laying a hand on the kid's back. "It's Jim Hopper. Chief Hopper. The gate is closed. You're safe."

It took a minute before Steve's head turned to look his way. "Where're we?" he mumbled, his bruised face squinting in confusion.

"My cabin." Steve just blinked at him but, without another option, Hopper continued, "It's about a five minute walk from here. I need you to walk, so I can carry Eleven."

It took a moment before understanding flashed through Steve's expression. He nodded, then hauled himself out of the car, leaning heavily on the hood. Hopper slid out himself, arranged Eleven in his arms bridal style, then lowered one shoulder so Steve could swing his arm around it. Intertwined, they shuffled to the cabin at an achingly slow pace.

When they finally made it to the door, Hopper deposited Steve in a kitchen chair before carrying El to her room. Once she was settled under her covers, he returned to the front of the cabin where he pushed his bed back against the front wall and cleared an assortment of heaters out of the way to the couch.

"You r'lly don...I'm 'kay..." Steve protested as Hopper helped him shuffle to the couch. The Chief just rolled his eyes and, after the kid was laying flat, swung Steve's legs over the armrest.

"Thanks," the teen muttered before his head dropped back down to

his chest and the stuffy snoring began again. Smiling despite himself, Hopper gently fit a decorative pillow under Steve's head and laid a packet of frozen peas over his nose.

"Okay?"

The question was so soft Hopper almost missed it. He looked left to see a half-awake Eleven still in bed but pointing at Steve. "Okay?" she repeated, this time a little more loudly.

"Yeah, kid. He'll be fine. Are you okay?"

Eleven nodded drowsily and she pulled her blankets tighter around her chin.

"Want to wash some of that gunk off your face?" Hopper asked, already seeing the smudges against her pillowcase. He didn't care around the pillowcase itself, more that it might be uncomfortable for Eleven in the morning.

She shook her head exactly once before her eyes drifted closed.

Knowing there was going to be a lot of activity in the front room throughout the night, Hopper closed her door so she could get her rest uninterrupted. At the very last moment though, he cracked it open an inch so he could hear her if she had a nightmare. After triple-locking the front door, he took a serious look at his bed, taking in the wrinkled and sweat-soaked sheets. Since he didn't have the energy to do a load of laundry that very moment, he grabbed the alarm clock from beside the bed and set it for two hours before curling up in the arm chair.

It was going to be a long night.

Not a lot of action in this chapter but we had a lot of missing time to cover and plotlines to wrap up. We'll get into more dialogue and interactions in the next chapter, beginning with the 2 AM concussion check.

Thanks for reading! I'd love to know what you thought.

2. Chapter 2

Holy feedback Batman! You all are wonderful. Thank you so much! I promise to respond to your reviews individually but I thought you'd prefer the new chapter first.

A/N: A good chunk of this chapter is choppy by design, to mirror Steve's mental state. It's not just poor proofreading. :)

Waking a kid who had been in a fight with the high school bully then battled a supernatural creature from a dead sleep by tapping his shoulder probably wasn't Hopper's best idea. Now his jaw was smarting where Steve had whacked him and, almost worse than that, the kid was still asleep, albeit not as peacefully as before.

After taking a second to evaluate his options, Hopper poked Steve's shoulder with much more force then quickly leapt back out of range. The kid immediately began to thrash again, struggling against beings unknown.

"It's just me, kid," Hopper said, trying to keep from shouting. "Chief Hopper. You're at my cabin."

Thankfully, Steve stilled. After a minute, he looked over at the chief through swollen eyes but didn't say anything.

"You were in a fight," Hopper continued. "With Billy Hargrove. You remember that?"

Steve winced then nodded.

"You're staying with me while your folks are out of town." Hopper waited for some sort of acknowledgement from Steve but, when he didn't get one, barreled ahead with the first question on the list from Dr. Wilkin. "You know your name?"

Steve nodded.

"I need you to tell it to me, kid."

"Steve 'aring'n."

"What city do you live in?"

There was a brief pause before, "Haw'ins."

"That's right. You in pain at all?"

Steve just closed his eyes and tilted his head to the right, which Hopper took to mean 'no'. "Ca'I'go 'ack to slee' 'ow?"

"Sure kid." But Steve had already passed out again.

Hopper exchanged the peas for ice wrapped in a towel and rested it against the stitches in Steve's forehead. Then he reset his alarm and finagled himself back into the small arm chair. "See ya in a couple hours."

It felt like Hopper had just closed his eyes before his alarm sounded again. He smacked at it hurriedly, before it woke Eleven, then stretched his arms over the back of the chair, grimacing when something popped.

This time, he firmly grabbed Steve's wrists, at the same time he tapped the kid on the shoulder. Steve tried to shoot upright, his expression panicked, but Hopper held him steady, repeating his name, where Steve was, that the gate had been closed, as loudly as he dared with Eleven sleeping in the next room. Eventually the teen relaxed and his gaze focused on Hopper.

"Lemme sleep," he slurred, trying to free himself from Hopper's grip.

"Can't, sorry. Doctor's orders." With that, the chief released him. "Gotta run through the questions again. Name?"

"Steve 'aring't'n."

"Who's the president?"

Steve's brow furrowed and he was silent for so long Hopper wasn't sure he was going to get an answer. But then the kid mumbled,

"Reagan."

"What school do you go to?"

This answer came much more quickly: "'aw'ins 'igh."

Hopper nodded and, after deciding that was enough questions to check Steve's mental state, put the list from Wilkin back on the coffee table. "You passed kid," he declared.

Steve just smiled lopsidedly before his eyes closed and his breathing began to slow.

Hopper spared another minute to readjust the blanket over Steve's legs before going to check on Eleven, who hadn't so much as shifted positions since falling asleep. Since he couldn't see her chest moving under the comforter, he stuck a finger under her nose to make sure she was still breathing before returning to the main room, resetting his alarm, and praying he'd fall right to sleep to maximize his allotted two hours.

He needn't have worried; he was out before his head hit the back of the armchair.

Eleven's eyes shot open, knowing without having to check that it was six-three-zero. Hopper was going to wake up Steve, ask him questions, then let him go back to sleep.

He was tired, after looking after her and Steve. She would let him sleep.

Eleven climbed out of bed, blanket wrapped around her like a cape, and turned off the button for the alarm with her mind.

Then she held out her hand toward Steve to keep him still while she woke him up.

"Steve," she said, her voice tight with concentration.

He tried to sit upright then began to fight her when he couldn't.

"Steve," she said again, this time a little louder.

His bruised eyes opened a crack and he stopped moving as soon as he recognized her.

"re's Hopper?" he mumbled.

"Tired. Needs sleep."

Steve stared at her. "You too."

She nodded, then reached for the paper. In the moonlight, she could only see some of the words and could understand even less. But she'd heard Hopper ask them at two-three-seven and four-three-six so she would be okay. "Questions."

Before she could actually ask them, Steve spoke up. "Steve H'rringt'n, 'awkins, 1984."

Seemed good enough to her.

She nodded then patted his shoulder. "Good night Steve."

"Thanks, I'ven," Steve mumbled as his eyes slid closed.

She wiped the blood from under her nose then went over to the alarm and manually turned it back on. After setting it for two more hours, she climbed back into bed, tucked her bear under her arm and tugged her blankets tightly around her.

She was asleep ten seconds later.

A bright light pulled Steve into consciousness. He tried batting it away...with no success. So he opened his eyes...and nearly blinded himself.

The light was coming from up high so Steve held up his hand, blocking it.

Window, his brain belatedly supplied.

Then Steve saw the deer head mounted on the wall.

What the...

He looked around frantically, memories clicking into place when he spotted Eleven curled up in a ball in an arm chair, her head on the armrest, munching on a waffle.

Then she looked up, making eye contact with Steve.

The next second, something appeared about two inches from his face and he jerked back, sliding a few inches up the armrest of the couch. It took his eyes a moment to focus on a plate stacked high with overlapping waffles.

"Eggos," Eleven said, taking another bite of one of her own.

Steve blinked, then the plate was gone, replaced by Hopper.

"How you feeling?" the chief asked as he put the plate on the coffee table. Yet, a second later, it slid back into Steve's line of vision.

Hopper looked left then shook his head. "Thanks for sharing Jane but I don't think he's up for Eggos right now."

Jane? Steve wondered flittingly before a sharp pain lanced through his brain. He rubbed at the bridge of his nose with the back of his hand, only barely able to hear Eleven replying in the distance: "Friends eat Eggos. Friends feel better."

Was she talking to him? Steve put down his hand and saw Eleven pointing at him. "Friend," she declared. "Protected friends."

Hopper smiled but his eyes were sad. Steve didn't know why.

"I'll try one," he heard himself say, again not knowing why.

Eleven's face lit up—ah, that was why—and Hopper handed one over, looking a little...concerned.

With good reason. Steve had hardly taken a bite before his stomach revolted. It took everything he had to keep from seeing the waffle

again.

"Sorry El," he muttered once the nausea began to subside.

Then time got a little blurry and next thing he knew he was handing back an empty glass to Hopper.

"Let's start with something a little softer," Hopper then said, holding out a banana that had seen better days.

Steve shook his head but Hopper persisted. "You need food in your stomach to take painkillers."

Well, in that case.

Steve took a few bites of the banana, swallowed hard and begged any entity out there to keep it down. When it did, Hopper gave him three pills and another glass of water.

"Rest kid," Hopper said before standing. "Eggs too, Jane."

She smiled mischievously, which was the last thing Steve remembered before sleep pulled him under.

Steve was painfully aware of how much everything hurt. But this time it was different. His eyes were no longer heavy with sleep and his face, though still extremely tender, no longer felt like it was on fire. In fact, the most pressing pain was his back, probably from lying on the couch for so long. Which meant he should probably get up... Which meant he needed to open his eyes.

He immediately did a double-take. A curly-haired girl was sitting in the armchair, mouth moving while she stared at a book. Was she speaking? He wasn't hearing anything.

Then his vision sharpened and he recognized the kid as Eleven, and the book as... *Ramona* something. It hurt Steve's brain to stare at the title too long. Perks of that concussion. Frickin' Billy Hargrove.

...And now she was looking at him.

"Hi," he grunted out.

"Hi," she repeated, still staring at him.

Before Steve could speak again, his back complained with much more urgency and he spent the next minute or so arranging himself in a sitting position.

A litany of curse words went through his head as every part of his body chimed in with their respective aches and pains. He thought he'd done a good job of not vocalizing it, until he refocused on Eleven, whose eyebrows had disappeared into her hairline.

He almost swore again. "Don' r'peat that," he mumbled.

She nodded then returned to her book. Her lips started moving again but this time, Steve was sure she wasn't actually saying anything.

Once he'd caught his breath, he took a look around the part of the cabin he could see without turning his head.

"Where's Hopper?"

Eleven pointed over her shoulder at the back of the cabin. "Laundry."

Steve nodded, then grimaced as another concern made itself known. "Bathroom?"

Eleven pointed to somewhere behind Steve. Not trusting his head to move of its own accord, Steve turned his upper body to see the tub and sink, and a small door next to that that most likely held the toilet.

Doing his best to keep back the curses, he hauled himself upright and shuffled over, bracing himself on the couch for as long as possible.

By the time his business was done and he'd stepped out of the closet, Eleven and Hopper were sitting at the table, eating.

"Good to see you up and about," Hopper said.

Steve grunted out a noncommittal reply and went to wash his hands,

making sure to avoid looking at himself in the mirror.

"You hungry?" Hopper asked as soon as Steve turned back around.

The teen nodded as he slowly hobbled over to the table, where he sank into the first available seat.

There was scratching sound then a full plate of waffles slid into his field of vision.

"Wha's'with the Eggos?" he asked, all the while glad he no longer sounded like he was drunk off his ass.

Hopper shrugged as he stood up and walked over to the pantry. "She loves 'em. Plus, it's been a trying few days. I'm okay losing this one." He pulled out a box of cereal, a loaf of bread and a few other breakfast items. "What sounds good?"

The teen's stomach lurched at the eggs, the sausage and the sugary cereal. "Toast?" he asked, hopefully.

"And for a protein?" Geez, Hopper had this dad routine down pat.

"Peanut butter?"

Hopper rustled through the cabinets, then pulled out a jar and and looked inside. "You're in luck."

As the chief slid bread into the toaster, Steve turned to look at Eleven. "You know there's real waffles right? Not jus' this frozen stuff."

Her eyes widened and the Eggo just about fell out of her hand. "These aren't real?" she said slowly, with great pauses between words.

Steve winced at her expression, then grimaced when that motion sent a lance of pain through his brain. "They are," he backtracked, "but they're frozen. Should have 'em fresh a'least once."

"It's on the list," Hopper said, sliding a slice of toast coated with peanut butter in front of Steve.

As Eleven whirled to face Hopper, demanding an explanation, Steve stared at the slice of toast for a moment, preparing his system. Thankfully, his stomach only growled so Steve took that as a signal to dig in. He must have been hungrier than he thought since the peanut butter toast was gone about ten seconds later. Without being asked, Hopper poured him a glass of milk, which Steve sipped at gratefully.

"Was Dustin here?" Steve asked when he was done. There was a niggling memory of the thirteen year old being around him. 'Course that could have been last night right after the fight. He didn't remember a whole lot of that whole situation.

"This morning. Said Jonathan gave him the directions," Hopper replied, not looking particularly happy. "They're all coming by after school to check on you."

Try as he might, Steve couldn't find it within himself to be concerned about missing school, not after everything that had happened in the last few days.

"I called the principal, told him you'd be out," Hopper continued, before he paused to knock back a half glass of milk himself. "Also called your folks. Your mom's on the last flight out tonight."

Steve's heart lifted ever so slightly at those words. "Dad too?" he asked, tempering his reaction in case the answer was 'yes'.

Thankfully, Hopper just shook his head.

Steve smiled widely then scrambled for a napkin when his split lip opened again. While Steve was fairly sure his dad loved him in some capacity (mostly that he was pretty sure his dad would donate a kidney, if Steve ever needed one), they disagreed on everything and anything in Steve's life—his grades, his girlfriends, his hairstyles, his future—which made building a real relationship almost impossible. In fact, the only thing they did agree on was basketball. His mom was a little more understanding—had always been—warm and inviting to his dad's curt and distant. It'd been a long time since the two of them had spent any time together without his father.

That thought combined with the painkillers Hopper kept throwing at

him every few hours created a warm haze that floated Steve well into the afternoon. He and Eleven read a little (well, Eleven mostly read to him because the words on the page were swirling around too much to be legible), finished the puzzle (Steve fared much better on that, though his head began to throb if he concentrated too hard), and listened to music (Hopper's taste was worse than his dad's, not that Steve was in a position to comment on it).

He must have fallen asleep at some point because, when he drifted back into semi-consciousness, he saw a blanket draping itself over him, no human in sight.

Steve tried to thank Eleven, but couldn't make his mouth form the words. He was able to make himself smile, which he hoped she understood, before he slid back into his peaceful, definitely not-a-nightmare, dream.

Next up: the kids' visit!

Thanks for reading! I'd love to know what you thought!

3. Chapter 3

A/N: It's my headcanon that sometime while Steve was asleep, Hopper and Eleven talked about Terry and her given name, with Eleven deciding she wants to go by Jane. That's why the part of the second chapter from her point of view is still "Eleven" but later on, Hopper refers to her as Jane. The party is all going to call her Jane in this chapter, Steve a little later because it takes them a while to clue him into it. It's only done in passing if you'd prefer that everyone still calls her El! I'm just mentioning it because it's never explicitly explained, mostly because Steve is a pretty unreliable narrator, given that he's only awake for small snippets of action.

Thank you for all your wonderful feedback! It was more than I ever hoped for when I first posted this fic. I hope you enjoy the final chapter!

"Shit, he looks worse than yesterday." The voice was loud, right next to Steve's ear, jarring him into semi-awareness. "Are we sure he's gonna be okay?"

Steve recognized the voice. It was one of the kids, he just couldn't say which.

"Sure he is," someone else said, though they sounded less than convinced. "It takes more than that to take out *Steve Harrington*."

Damn straight it did.

Knowing the kids were close, Steve opened his eyes slowly, so as not to frighten any of them—he had enough bruises on his face as is. Max, Lucas and Dustin were hovering over him with Dustin's face about six inches from his own.

The curly-haired kid pulled back sharply but then recovered and asked, "Hey Steve. How're ya feeling?"

"Just great," the teen lied as his body began to ache full-force. He

looked at all three expectantly, waiting for them to move back now that he was awake.

They didn't.

"I'm gonna sit up now," Steve finally announced.

"Oh, sorry," the kids muttered, disappearing out of his line of sight.

By the time Steve had pushed himself into a sitting position, the three were lined up in front of the coffee table, looking at him with varying degrees of concern. Steve was instantly uncomfortable, not used to being the recipient of this much caring at any given time. "Stop it, I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," Lucas piped up.

"Neither do the rest of you, but you don't see me commenting on it." It was a little bit of an exaggeration as the kids didn't look any physically worse than the last time Steve'd seen them, but he was hoping that comment would be enough to get them to move on.

No such luck; the three continued to watch him anxiously, not saying a word.

After another moment, Steve couldn't take it anymore. "Don't you shitheads have anything better to do than stare at me?"

Max actually shook her head while Dustin just plopped down on the couch beside Steve. "Will stayed home from school today," he began even though no one had asked. "He's fine. His mom's just a little spooked."

"Understandable."

Suddenly Max was sitting down too, Lucas on her other side, and Steve was forced to shift over so there'd be room.

"He wanted to come over here too," Dustin continued, "but Mrs. Byers said no. But she did say to tell you, if you get tired of microwave dinners, you can stop by her place anytime."

"That's nice of her."

"And Max said Billy didn't come home last night."

Steve turned to look at the girl, who nodded slowly.

"He spent the night in jail," Hopper boomed from the other side of the cabin.

"He *what*?" Steve exclaimed, struggling to look over the back of the couch without further injuring his ribs or whacking one of the kids. It wasn't that Billy didn't deserve it, it was more that that was the most serious punishment he'd heard of Hopper dealing out in recent years.

By this time the chief had repeated his statement, Steve had managed to awkwardly lean on the back of the couch in a way that allowed him to see Mike, Eleven and Hopper playing cards without increasing his net ache.

His mind was racing with questions but, before he could vocalize any of them, Eleven played her last card, which elicited a loud groan from Mike, then declared, "He's a mouth breather."

"Hey!" Hopper put his hand on top of the discards, keeping her from pushing them toward Mike to shuffle. "What did we say about using that word?"

"Deserved it," Eleven mumbled unrepentant.

"He kinda does," Mike chimed in but was quickly silenced by a glare from Hopper.

The chief then returned to looking at Eleven, waiting for her to acknowledge his question. "Jane," he said, drawing out the syllables of her name.

Finally, she looked over at him and nodded. "Okay."

"That's my girl." Hopper ruffled Eleven's hair then swept in the cards and began to shuffle them.

Steve was just about to turn around to ease his aching ribs when

Hopper added, "He'll also be seeing a therapist twice a week for a while."

"He *what*?" Now it was Max's turn to spin around to look incredulously at Hopper.

"He'll be seeing a therapist to work out a few things," the chief repeated calmly as he began to deal out a new hand.

Max's face darkened then suddenly Lucas cried out in pain.

"How could you?" she demanded. Her voice was a little wobbly but her face was turned away from Steve so he couldn't see her expression.

"I didn't say anything!" Lucas shouted, rubbing at his arm.

"It didn't come from any of you," Hopper said loudly, cards down in case he needed to intervene. "Flo has a knack for hearing these sorts of things." The chief was quiet for a beat then added, "But, if you *did* have something to say, I hope you'd feel okay telling me about it. Not today, not even next week, just...sometime."

Max turned back to look at him, a glint in her eyes, and nodded.

"Sorry stalker," she mumbled as she righted herself on the couch, Steve a split second behind her.

"sokay," Lucas said, seconds before Max's chin began to wobble.

Steve tilted his head slightly, motioning for Lucas to comfort her but the kid's eyes only widened in panic. Wondering how this was his life, the senior sighed and slung his arm around Max's shoulders. "It'll be okay Red. I'll give you my number; you can call me if things get bad."

"Or me," Eleven piped up in the background, sounding slightly gleeful.

"No, absolutely not," Hopper said firmly but Steve got the sense he was talking more to Eleven than him.

A chair screeched behind them a beat before Hopper rounded the couch and pointed at Max, mouth open to deliver some sort of lecture. But then, his expression softened and he let out a deep sigh. "At least *try* to call a law enforcement official first. Powell and Callahan aren't the brightest but they are surprisingly good at stopping people from hurting others."

"I'll be a last resort," Steve added when the girl still didn't look reassured.

At that, Max smiled wanly then leaned further into Steve's embrace.

For about a second.

"You smell," she said, wrinkling her nose and pulling back, all indicators that she had been about to cry gone.

"After all I did for you shitheads, that's all you have to say to me?" Steve fired back with mock indignation. In all honesty, he was more than happy for the return to a lighter subject since Harringtons were statistically terrible at *feelings*. Just in case her meter was broken though, Steve smiled as widely as he could to let her know he was kidding. Kinda.

He yanked at his blanket which the kids were all sitting on, forcing them to their feet. "Go bug Eleven—"

"—Jane—" a chorus interjected.

"—Jane, you ungrateful twerps."

The kids nodded, then Max and Dustin headed over toward the kitchen, only looking back once. Lucas however remained standing in front of Steve, fiddling with his hands.

"Do you need something?" Steve said, wincing when he sounded short, gruff, and not unlike his father.

Lucas opened his mouth, closed it, then shifted his weight back and forth nervously.

"Seriously man, is everything—"

"Thank you," the kid blurted out, before dashing around the couch and joining whatever mayhem was happening on the other side of the cabin.

Steve stared at the newly vacated space for another moment until his brain caught up with what had happened. More emotionally tired than physically, he braced his elbows against his knees, and rested his head in his hands, mindful of the intense throbbing.

"Do you need anything?"

Steve jerked upright at the sound of Nancy's voice, finding her standing awkwardly between him and the broken TV. "How... Where..."

"Do you really think the kids should be wandering around the woods by themselves?" she countered.

"Hell no. Little shits are going to get in trouble just walking to the grocery store."

Nancy smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes, and nodded. Then she pointed to Eleven's room. "Jane let me study in there. I didn't want to overwhelm you while the kids were still around."

Steve only nodded, unable to think of anything to say. Nancy apparently couldn't either and the conversation dissolved into silence.

After a minute of awkwardness, Steve motioned to the couch, pulling in the blanket even more so there'd be room for her. "Wanna sit?"

She nodded then perched on the other side of the couch from him.

"You doing okay?" he asked, his voice slightly higher than it should have been.

She looked at him and actually laughed. "Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

"I'll be fine. Chicks dig scars right?"

Nancy scrunched up her nose and shook her head. "Not as much as

you think."

"Damn." Steve let a beat pass before trying again. "Seriously, though, you alright? It can't have been fun sweating the monster out of Will."

Nancy didn't respond right away, instead taking a long look around the cabin. "No, it wasn't," she said almost absently, before turning to look back at Steve. "But I'll be okay."

Then she swallowed hard, looking extremely distressed. "Steve..."

"Not right now, Nance," he interrupted, holding up his hand for emphasis. He was far too exhausted for *that* conversation at this moment. "I know we need to, but I can't right now."

She stared at him for another moment before nodding. "Okay," she said, looking more than a little relieved.

Before either one of them could speak again, Steve heard dice being rolled, followed by loud cheering.

"Are they really playing a board game?" he asked, incredulous. In hindsight, he should have expected that from the party who loved playing D&D but...actually, there was no 'but'. He really should have expected them to do something other than homework at Hopper's cabin, this being their real first chance to see El—Jane in a year.

"Monopoly," Nancy reported after looking over her shoulder.

"Dear lord. They'll be here for hours."

Another awkward silence ensued with Nancy and Steve pointedly not staring at each other.

"I can study," Nancy finally offered. "I mean, I do have a big calc test tomorrow."

If Steve had learned anything over the last year of dating Nancy, it was that studying calmed her down in times of stress. Besides, she had to keep her grades up if she was going to get accepted into her dream schools. "Go for it," Steve said, thankful for the distraction.

She got up from the couch and walked back into Jane's room. To his surprise, she returned a minute later with her backpack and spread her calc stuff over the coffee table.

"You sure you don't want to sit up here?" Steve asked, pulling the rest of the blanket into his lap so she'd have space for her stuff. "There's plenty of room."

She shook her head. "Nah, I need the table. Besides, you should probably lie down. You're not looking so good."

"Thanks Nancy," he said with a snort, grimacing when his nose began to throb.

Thankfully, she hadn't noticed and instead lobbed an eraser at his chest. "You know what I mean. You need rest."

He *had* known but it'd been too good of an opportunity to pass up. Besides, if he was being completely honest, his head was starting to hurt a little. Probably from being focused on more than one conversation in the last half hour.

Steve tossed back the eraser, silently conceding her point, then leaned back against the sofa, leaving plenty of room in case Nancy changed her mind. As he listened to the loud exclamations from the kids in the background, he allowed his eyes to slip closed...just for a second.

Then someone was kissing his forehead, dragging him back into semi-consciousness. "Thank you," Nancy whispered, right next to his ear.

Someone else was ruffling his hair. "Get well soon buddy." That was Dustin. "P.S. Your bat is by the door."

"Okay guys, leave him alone," Hopper said and suddenly the sounds were gone.

Sleep was pulling on Steve again and this time he gave in willingly, feeling more at home than he had in a long while.

Epilogue:

To say Steve's mom freaked out when she saw his face was an understatement. Even though he'd washed what wasn't cut or stitched before they'd left the cabin, his mom still gasped, hands pulled tight to her mouth, then enveloped Steve in a hug that left him struggling to breathe.

Thankfully Hopper intervened once Steve started turning purple.

Caroline then demanded an explanation and Jane, taking advantage of Steve not being able to catch his breath, launched into a sanitized account of how he'd saved her friends. Since the rehearsed story had been the one about Steve getting mugged, both Hopper and Steve had stared at Jane in surprise but she just nodded firmly, then slid back under Hopper's arm.

"Oh honey," Steve's mom breathed, her eyes watering as she gently rested her hands on either side of Steve's face. Then she turned to Hopper, hands moving down to tightly grasp Steve's wrist. "Does he need to see a doctor again? Does he need to take medication? Do—"

"Maybe in the house, mom?" Steve suggested, as they were only a step away from the truck.

Caroline nodded and formally invited them in. While Hopper and his mom talked, Steve saw Jane looking around and offered her a tour. They'd barely seen any of the house before hitting the office but, once Jane had entered, she pretty much refused to leave. The room wasn't very large but had one floor-to-ceiling built-in bookcase that Jane ran to right away. Most of them were finance-related or books above her reading level, but she sunk into an arm chair and paged through a few all the same.

When it was time for them to go, Hopper practically had to push Jane out of the house. "You can come back any time," Steve told her, causing her to grin, before climbing back into the truck.

Hopper didn't say anything in opposition, which Steve counted as a small win for the day. "You know how to get a hold of me if you need anything," the chief said to Caroline as he started the truck and pulled away.

Steve stayed home from school the next two days: the first because he couldn't focus on anything without feeling like something was stabbing his brain, and the second because his mom had been terrified by the pamphlet Hopper had passed on about concussions and the dangers of going back to normal activities too soon. Steve had complained just enough to be believable before surrendering and spending the day hanging out with his mom, catching up on what little bits of schoolwork he could manage before his brain started to hurt.

That day, his mom also took him to the family doctor who confirmed everything Wilkin had said three days ago. Steve had known he was probably going to be out of sports for a while, but that didn't make it hurt any less when Dr. Travis officially confirmed it. Travis also told him to expect to miss the first few games of the season, which wasn't ideal, but Steve had been through enough in the past week that he wasn't up for risking trying to get back early. He was going to need his brain firing at full capacity to keep up with all the supernatural happenings in Hawkins.

And so the days passed while Steve slowly but steadily returned to his normal life. Just before Thanksgiving, he was cleared to practice full-speed again, and the very next morning, Hopper called, telling him to stop by the cabin when he was free. Unable to shake the feeling that something was wrong, Steve drove out there right after practice, stopping only to pick up his spiked bat...just in case.

As soon as he walked through the doorway, Hopper handed him a box. "If you're going to keep throwing yourself into fights, you need to know how to defend yourself," he said without preamble.

Confused, Steve flipped open the lid to find a padded helmet, boxing gloves and a mouth guard.

"Lessons start Saturday at 8," the chief stated before walking into the kitchen to try to fix dinner.

Steve just smiled, a familiar warmth spreading through his chest, then he put down the box and offered to chop the vegetables.

Thank you again for all your wonderful emails, kudos, and reviews! It's been a pleasure writing in this fandom! I'd love to know what you thought of the final chapter on your way out!

Until next time,

usa123